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# Child Maltreatment and Paternal Deprivation: A Manifesto for Research, Prevention, and Treatment

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**Child Maltreatment and Paternal Deprivation: A Manifesto for Research, Prevention, and Treatment**, by Henry B. Biller and Richard S. Solomon. Lexington, MA: D.C. Health, 1986, 320 pp., \$26.00.

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When I was asked to review this book, I looked forward to the task. Child maltreatment is an important subject, and the role of fathers in child development has only recently received the attention it deserves. The title was exciting, alluding to a cohesive plan for research, prevention and treatment. On cursory examination the work appeared well suited to clinical sociologists, promising a multidisciplinary approach, research and clinical experience coming together around child maltreatment.

Both authors are psychologists but do not confine themselves to a psychological perspective. Henry Biller's numerous publications on paternal deprivation make him one of the leading experts. He has also been involved in a number of practice settings. Richard Solomon is codirector of a multidisciplinary group practice specializing in child abuse.

The beginning is direct, but the initially clear focus waivers. The proposed connection between child maltreatment and paternal deprivation becomes tenuous. Two books uneasily coexist under the same title. One offers an overview of child maltreatment; the other reviews effects of paternal deprivation on child development. The book is not divided into sections, but the chapters fall into three areas: child maltreatment, effects of paternal deprivation on child development, and a short final section on research and treatment. Though often informative, overall the book promises more than it delivers.

The thesis of this book is the existence of a complex connection between paternal deprivation and child maltreatment: Paternal deprivation contributes directly and indirectly to most child maltreatment. Child maltreatment, as defined, includes severe cases of abuse and neglect as well as inappropriate and inadequate parenting. But this definition creates some problems integrating the two halves of the book.

Chapters 2-4 cover the historical and cultural context and current problems of defining child maltreatment, its incidence and epidemiology, and current theoretical models. Chapter 5 on sexual maltreatment is a puzzle. The authors do not deal in detail with the types of abuse on the continuum of maltreatment they developed. Why they have a chapter on sexual maltreatment and not on physical abuse or severe neglect is never explained. The chapter seems adrift, as if the authors had material on sexual abuses lying about and thought this would be a good place for it.

The research review in Chapters 6-10 shows effects of paternal deprivation

on cognitive functioning, self-esteem, personal adjustment, moral development, antisocial behavior, family interaction patterns, and sex role development. These chapters and the bibliography provide a concise and informative introduction to the effects of paternal deprivation on child development, valuable to clinical sociologists working with children and families.

Though central to the thesis of the book, the authors assert, without support, that children in single-parent families are at greater risk of maltreatment because of stress on single parents (read “mothers”). That is, single-parent mothers are more likely to be abusive because they lack the emotional support of a husband. This could be a valid point that would have made the connection between paternal deprivation and child maltreatment much clearer and more compelling. Unfortunately, the authors never pick up this thread. They chose, instead, to attend to the consequences of paternal deprivation for personality development.

One of the problems I had writing this review was in integrating the two parts of the book using the bridge supplied by the authors. They attempt to link child maltreatment and paternal deprivation by using a definition of child maltreatment so broad it includes relatively benign situations as well as severe abuse and neglect. The authors apparently consider all children who are experiencing paternal deprivation as maltreated. Unfortunately, they do not make a strong case that the effects they discuss are severe enough to be labeled “maltreatment.” They do not convince me that paternal deprivation, per se, is maltreatment.

But the linkage bothers me: Though the authors give the disclaimer that some children may be better off separated from abusive fathers, it seems unfair to label single mothers “abusive.” Single mothers bear a hard burden raising children; it is not useful to imply their children are maltreated because fathers are not present. It is especially harsh to call “maltreated” a child who has lost a father through death.

As a practical matter, I’m not sure how often intervention for “maltreatment,” defined this broadly, would be implemented given the limited resources of most social service agencies and the extent of physical abuse and neglect. This is not to imply that there are no negative consequences for children without a father figure. The evidence presented shows developmental differences between children with positive father relationships and those without. What has not been shown is that these differences constitute abuse.

Chapter 9 concerns sex role development. Several studies cited report that boys raised in female-headed households are less aggressive in play. The implication is that this is bad for the child, but the tie to maltreatment is tenuous. It assumes that socialization into traditional male roles is the best outcome for a male child; any other outcome is maltreatment.

As another example, “an inhibiting sexist attitude toward a daughter can be viewed as maltreatment by the father.” An inhibiting sexist attitude may have negative consequences for a daughter’s personality development, but this state-

ment referred to the fact that fathers typically engage in less rough-and-tumble play with their daughters. Again, it is hard to see this as maltreatment. Much less space is given to the effects of father absence for sex role development in girls. In fairness, this may be more a reflection of that fact that less research exists on girls, rather than an oversight of the authors.

The first section has several good features. The second section has many good features. The problem is integrating the two sections into the promise of the book's title. Clinical sociologists and other readers will learn a lot about the consequences of paternal deprivation for child development but not much about child maltreatment as it is usually understood.

The subtitle of the book promises a "manifesto" for research, prevention and treatment. The proportion of the book devoted to these areas is not as great as the title implies. The text runs for 232 pages; 3 pages are devoted to research implications. The authors correctly call for longitudinal, multidisciplinary studies to assess the long-term effects of child maltreatment and paternal deprivation. Longitudinal research of the type called for is extremely expensive and funding for such studies is becoming scarce. Some speculation on innovative ways to overcome this problem would have been useful.

The value of the chapter on intervention requires the understanding that the authors are referring only to the "child maltreatment" of father absence. Setting aside the "maltreatment" label, the authors offer interesting suggestions for avoiding the negative effects of father absence. The more innovative suggestions are structural rather than individual: Educational systems and the mass media should give more attention to educating fathers and potential fathers on their role in child development. Welfare systems should be encouraged to support, not undermine, father-present families. Workplaces should support paternity leave so that fathers will have time to spend with newborns. Schools should provide incentives to male teachers, especially in the lower grades, who could serve as male role models for father-absent children. Schools should also encourage males from the community to come into the schools to share their work with the children.

Despite the promise of the title, the authors do not succeed in linking paternal deprivation and child maltreatment. The broad definition of maltreatment isn't strong enough by itself to unify the parts of this book. This does not mean that clinical sociologists and others who work with families and children will not find the book useful. The summary of the effects of father absence is excellent and helpful to those working with families of divorce. The suggestions for structural changes are excellent, although perhaps not realizable in the near future. The book does not provide all the solutions but does sensitize us to some of the problems.